



10 interview questions for teachers applying to private schools

What would you recommend an Oxbridge candidate to read? What would your students say about you? We explore the questions independent school headteachers ask at interview

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Teachers who have been through the job application process in both state and private education say it's mostly quite similar except at the interview stage. Matt Britland, director of ICT at The Lady Eleanor Holles school, found the interview more intensive: "It involved six separate interviews throughout the day including a lesson."

David Bradbury, deputy head at South Hampstead high school, says that the questions can be identical but what interviewers expect from the answers varies.

To help you tackle the trickiest interview queries, we asked independent school headteachers to share typical questions they ask and what they like to hear in response.

Share your thoughts and experiences in the thread below or via @GuardianTeach:

Leo Winkley, headteacher at St Peter's York

What animal would you choose from this list?

"I get a sense of an interviewee's personal style and their ability to deal with the unexpected by asking them this. With classroom teachers, I have used the following animals: swan; tiger; owl; sheepdog. For leadership positions I use beaver, hawk, lion and bear. You also see whether the candidate can get off the fence and decide what their dominant style is. You can do this with favourite drinks, biscuits, holiday destinations etc. It's surprisingly effective."

What mistakes have you made and learned from in your career?

"Candidates who can't think of a mistake or learning experience don't impress. This question establishes whether the interviewee is self critical and has the willingness - and humility - to keep learning. Don't say nothing because this makes you look arrogant and lacking in imagination. Don't say that your biggest mistake is being a perfectionist - this appears contrived or insincere. It's good to give examples that show you can accept failure and admit your mistakes. Name a situation that didn't work out well or a task in which your team fell short."

Katy Ricks, headteacher at Sevenoaks school

What would current students say about you?

"Would they say he or she is enthusiastic and really committed to a students' success? This helps to get a sense of their own self awareness and how important they are to their pupils."

What was your experience of school and what led you to teaching?

"[I ask this] to get a sense of their character and find out how their own education developed. It also shows their interests, passions and how they were inspired. I like to see how much they appreciated their own teachers when they were in school."

Helen Pike, headteacher at South Hampstead high school

What would you recommend an Oxbridge candidate to read?

"I ask this question because it's important to know that a candidate has continued developing their subject knowledge after their degree. I recently interviewed an economics teacher. We started talking about the French economist Thomas Piketty, and I said I was finding it difficult to read him in big chunks. He recommended a text which he said was less well known but more revealing, and he explained why. I bought the book, and he was right."

How would you contribute to the extra-curricular life of the school?

"This helps gauge whether the candidate has looked at the school website. A candidate told me he would like to set up a debating club. When I said we had debating already and regularly win competitions, he looked crushed, rather than turning the conversation round and saying 'that's great I'd love to be involved'. It also focuses on their contribution to extra-curricular activities, something that is vital to the school."

Dr Richard Maloney, headteacher at Bede's

When are you professionally satisfied?

"I'm looking for a sense that applicants are restless in their professional quest for excellence and that they care about the people they teach and value their success and happiness."

Nicola Huggett, headteacher, Blundell's

What problems prevent a child making progress and how do you help?

"The candidate needs to have an understanding of pastoral and academic reasons why a child might find a subject difficult. They also need an understanding of a range of interventions that might be used - and how they can be monitored."

You receive a pupil/parent concern about a member of staff in your department, what do you do?

"This question would be asked in a management role interview and I'd be looking for an understanding of school policy, an ability to handle difficult situations sensitively and someone who can formulate a plan - bringing a resolution to the problem."

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